

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

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C O N F I D E N T I A L KINGSTON 4962

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: EFIN, EAGR, ETRD, JM
SUBJECT: SHORTAGES, HOARDING AND FOOD DEMONSTRATIONS

1. INCREASED, ALBEIT SPORADIC, SHORTAGES OF CONSUMER GOODS AND FOOD ITEMS HAVE STIMULATED HOARDING, A HEATED PUBLIC DEBATE AND AT LEAST THREE "HOUSEWIVES DEMONSTRATIONS" IN JAMAICA OVER THE PAST MONTH. SHORTAGES OF MILK, SOAP, BABY FOOD, FLOUR, FISH, MEAT, DRUGS AND COOKING OIL HAVE BEEN OCCURRING SPORADICALLY AND WITH INCREASED FREQUENCY SINCE RIGID IMPORT LICENSING WENT INTO EFFECT IN LATE 1976. THE SHORTAGES HAVE BECOME PARTICULARLY ACUTE IN RECENT WEEKS WITH AN INDUSTRIAL DISPUTE AT THE SEPROD COMPANY, JAMAICA'S LARGEST PRODUCER OF COOKING OIL, SOAP, DETERGENT, AND MARGARINE. THE SHORTAGES HAVE LED IN TURN TO INCREASED HOARDING, BOTH BY CONSUMERS AND SHOPKEEPERS, AND INCREASED PRICES IN JAMAICA'S "HIGGLER" (MARKET PEDDLER) DISTRIBUTIVE SYSTEM.

2. SHORTAGES OF CERTAIN CONSUMER GOODS AND JAMAICA'S
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UNEMPLOYMENT SITUATION LED TO A "HOUSEWIVES PROTEST DEMONSTRATION" ON AUGUST 6 IN KINGSTON. THE PROTEST WAS HELD UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE "WOMEN'S FREEDOM MOVEMENT", AND OPPOSITION JAMAICA LABOUR PARTY (JLP) FRONT ORGANIZATION. THE DEMONSTRATION WAS FOLLOWED BY TWO OTHER DEMONSTRATIONS, ONE IN MONTEGO BAY AND THE OTHER IN KINGSTON OVER THE PAST TWO WEEKS. THE AUGUST

6 DEMONSTRATION BROUGHT SHARP CRITICISM FROM THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT OF THE RULING PEOPLE'S NATIONAL PARTY (PNP) HEADED BY THE WIFE OF THE PRIME MINISTER. THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT DECLARED THAT THE DEMONSTRATION "SMACKED OF THE CHILEAN SITUATION" AND EXHORTED JAMAICA'S WOMEN TO "LEARN FROM THE MISTAKE OF CHILE". "DAILY GLEANER" COLUMNIST DAVID D'COSTA TOOK ISSUE WITH THE PNP WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN AN ARTICLE ON AUGUST 13 WHICH CONDEMNED THE PNP PRONOUNCEMENT AS AN ATTEMPT TO IMPLICATE THE CIA IN THE DEMONSTRATIONS. THE NATIONAL CONSUMER'S LEAGUE CONDEMNED THE DEMONSTRATIONS BUT PLACED THE BLAME ON "THE GRAVE FOOD SITUATION."

3. IN REACTION TO THE AUGUST 6 DEMONSTRATION, MINISTER OF INDUSTRY AND COMMERCE DANNY WILLIAMS ISSUED A STATEMENT AUGUST 12 URGING JAMAICA TO "BEAR WITH SHORT-AGES" AND SAYING THAT STEPS WERE BEING TAKEN TO ALLEVIATE THE SITUATION WHICH HE ATTRIBUTED TO DELAYS IN PRODUCTION AT SEPROD. WILLIAMS SAID THAT PRICE INCREASES COULD BE EXPECTED IN SEPROD PRODUCTS BECAUSE OF THE DEVALUATION OF THE JAMAICAN DOLLAR. WILLIAMS' STATEMENT TOUCHED OFF YET ANOTHER ROUND OF REJOINDERS AND CLARIFICATIONS AS THE TRADE UNIONS AND CONSUMER GROUPS CRITICISED PRICE INCREASES DURING A PERIOD OF FROZEN WAGES. NEVERTHELESS, THE SEPROD INCREASES WERE GRANTED AUGUST 23 AND IMMEDIATELY CAME UNDER FIRE FROM

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LEFTIST GROUPS SUCH AS THE WORKERS LIBERATION LEAGUE.

4. ALTHOUGH OCCASIONAL SHORTAGES HAVE OCCURRED IN BASIC FOOD AND CONSUMER ITEMS OVER THE PAST YEAR, RECENT SHORTAGES HAVE BEEN MORE SEVERE AND HAVE LASTED LONGER THAN USUAL. THIS CAN BE ATTRIBUTED IN PART TO TIGHTER IMPORT RESTRICTIONS. MORE IMPORTANT HAS BEEN THE DELAYED EFFECTS OF THE GENERAL FREEZE ON LICENSES WHICH EXISTED EARLIER IN 1977, LABOR UNREST AND "WITHHOLDING" IN ANTICIPATION OF PRICE INCREASES. THE WFM DEMONSTRATIONS MARK THE FIRST ORGANIZED PUBLIC PROTESTS OVER THE GOVERNMENT'S HANDLING OF THE SHORT-AGES PROBLEM. ALL THREE DEMONSTRATIONS WERE ORGANIZED COVERTLY BY THE JAMAICA LABOR PARTY (ACCORDING TO A JLP SOURCE) AND THE WFM HAS NOW LENT CREDENCE TO THE ASSERTION BY ITSELF REQUESTING FORMAL AFFILIATION TO THE JLP. FINALLY, THE DEMONSTRATIONS AND PUBLIC DEBATE HAS HAD A TELLING EFFECT ON THE GOJ, BRINGING ABOUT PROTRACTED MEETINGS OF THE ECONOMIC COUNCIL AND CONSIDERABLE PRESSURE ON THE TRADE ADMINISTRATOR AND THE MINISTER OF INDUSTRY AND COMMERCE TO INSURE THAT THE SHORTAGES ARE ONLY A TEMPORARY PHENOMENON.

IT IS CLEAR THE DEMONSTRATIONS HAVE THE GOVERNMENT
NERVOUS AND, FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THE 1976 GENERAL
ELECTIONS, HAS PUT IT ON THE DEFENSIVE.
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Message Attributes

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